

MY SAY: How to create an enlightened society

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Article

The Edge - 09/08/2008

So, some Malaysians finally got what they wanted pop star Avril Lavigne performing a concert in Kuala Lumpur. Earlier, she had been considered "unsuitable", especially since the show was scheduled to take place two days before the National Day celebrations. Undeniably, it was a night to remember, especially for most of the fans.

There was another event that took place that captured the hearts and minds of a larger cross-section of Malaysians. It was the visit of former Indian president Dr A P J Abdul Kalam to Malaysia, which began just a day before Avril's concert.

Kalam was invited to speak at the prestigious Khazanah Global Lectures 2008, a premier programme hosted by Khazanah Nasional Bhd. He later visited the Street of Harmony, which elicited a lot of praise from the former statesman. "This entire place is indeed fantastic," he said after a two-hour walk along the heritage trail, acknowledging the tremendous conservation efforts that have gone into preserving the multi-racial "living culture" of George Town, which was recently listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site, together with Melaka.

The trail boasts a diversity of structures ranging from the Sri Maha Mariamman. Goddess of Mercy and Teo Chew temples to the Kapitan Keling and Acheen Street mosques, St George's and Assumption churches, the Nagore shrine and the Penang Islamic Museum. Diverse too was the population that once populated these areas: Malays, Indians, Chinese, Eurasians, Armenians, Japanese, British, Arabs, Jews, Filipinos and other nationalities — who had all contributed to the development of the area well before World War II.

Earlier, Kalam, who is also a renowned nuclear scientist, was conferred a honorary Doctor of Science degree by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It was here that Kalam shared his thoughts of what it takes to create and preserve such diversity in harmony. In his acceptance speech during the convocation, he spoke about how to create an enlightened society.

The first component is to establish "education with a value system", that is, a mission-oriented, value-based learning. During this stage, the children need value-based education for them to become good citizens. He quoted a great teacher, "Give me a child for seven years. Afterwards, let the God or devil take the child. They cannot change the child." Such is the power of education! It can inculcate moral leadership in children, with emphasis on two important aspects. "First, it requires the ability to have compelling and powerful dreams or visions of human betterment, a state of things in which human beings could be better off in the future than they are now. Secondly, moral leadership requires a disposition to do the right thing and influence others also to do the right thing. If the child misses this value-based education in school, no government or society can establish a transparent society or a society with integrity," said Kalam. He advocated that moral science be taught till the age of 17. Such enlightened individuals will definitely promote peace and harmony on the planet.

The second component is about transforming religion into spirituality. Kalam spoke about religion transforming itself into a dynamic spiritual force, enabling enlightened spiritual and scientific leaders to converge to give reverence to human life. The message is: the best component of religion can be transformed into a spiritual force that can shape society.

Last but not least is the component that allows a developing nation to transform into a developed one through economic prosperity, where large societal imbalances can be removed. Here, Kalam cited India which strives to bridge the rural-urban divide by providing urban amenities in rural areas.

Unlike Avril's concert, Kalam's visit will have a more lasting impact on the future of Malaysia. Through his deep thoughts and articulation of profound ideas, Malaysians are now reminded of their common heritage. By taking a walk down the Street of Harmony, India's 11th president has indeed argued convincingly for Malaysia to heed the importance of *perpaduan teras kejayaan* (unity is the core of success) the slogan for this year's National Day celebration. Now, it is really up to us to make it work.

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